The mismeasure of participation:

how choosing the ‘wrong’ statistic

helped seal the fate of Aimhigher

Neil Harrison

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

*Extant between 2004 and 2011,* Aimhigher *was the UK government’s flagship national initiative for widening participation to higher education for young people from disadvantaged social groups, with costs approaching £1billion. Its demise was predicated on a perceived lack of progress and the absence of compelling evaluative research. This paper argues that this ‘lack of progress’ was at least partly due to a confusion in the implementation of the policy aim leading,* inter alia*, to the late adoption of a poor outcome measure that underestimated improvements in participation from the target groups and focused on the wrong stage of entry to higher education.*

Keywords: higher education, widening participation, policy success, performance indicators, Aimhigher

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

**Introduction**

The issue of ‘widening participation’ has been of major policy significance in the United Kingdom since the publication of the Dearing Report (NCIHE, 1997), which reported that the chances of a young person entering higher education were strongly determined by the socio-economic status of their family. Specifically, a young person from the highest social group – comprising professionals and senior managers – was around six times as likely to take up a university place as one from the lowest group – comprising unskilled manual workers. (To avoid clumsy phrasing the term ‘university’ is used in this paper to mean any institution offering higher education.)

The agenda to narrow what became known as the ‘social class gap’ gathered pace in the early years of the New Labour government, with a number of tentative initiatives designed to encourage a more diverse pool of applicants to higher education (DFEE, 2000). These were gradually rationalised, culminating in the creation of the Aimhigher programme in 2004 (DfES, 2003a). Aimhigher was charged to ‘widen participation in higher education and increase the number of young people who have the abilities and aspirations to benefit from it’(HEFCE, 2004:7). It was conceived as a national programme that would operate at three levels (national, regional and sub-regional ‘area’), with most of the delivery being undertaken by over forty ‘area partnerships’ of universities, colleges, schools, local authorities and others. The funding for Aimhigher ran to £136 million in its first year of operation, though this was almost halved by the end of its life, with the regional role being largely abolished. This was directed into a wide-ranging and highly-localised portfolio of activities, including summer schools, tutoring and mentoring, employers links, work-based learning, curriculum enhancement, university taster days and so on.

November 2010 saw the announcement that Aimhigher was to be abolished in July 2011. This was hardly surprising given the austerity measures brought in by the Coalition government and the previous comments of the new Universities Minister David Willetts, who in opposition had expressed his scepticism about the ‘rather disappointing record of Aimhigher, which has not yet succeeded in spreading university opportunities on the scale that we might have hoped for’(Willetts, 2008), echoing earlier criticism from party colleague Boris Johnson (Sanders, 2006). In fact, Aimhigher was widely seen as being prime for abolition at the end of its three year funding envelope prior to the 2010 General Election, with many practitioners expecting support for widening participation to be reduced in light of the 2009 cuts in higher education funding (Attwood, 2010). One of the problems was a perceived lack of direct evidence of efficacy (Gorard *et al*, 2006), even though the portfolio of activities had been carefully honed and was highly-regarded by young people, schools, parents and communities alike (Baxter, Tate and Hatt 2007; Hatt, Baxter and Tate, 2008; Moore and Dunworth, 2011).

It is important to note that Aimhigher was not the sole expression of widening participation activity during this period. Most universities and many local authorities and charitable organisations (eg the Sutton Trust and students’ unions) have historically operated their own outreach projects and continued to do so throughout the lifetime of Aimhigher, whether or not they bore that branding (Universities UK, 2005). These were supplemented from 2006 by the large-scale adoption of lucrative financial bursaries to entice students from backgrounds not traditionally associated with progression to higher education, though whether these had any serious impact is moot (Harrison and Hatt, 2012). These features muddy the waters somewhat in any discussion about the efficacy of Aimhigher and its place in the complex web of interactions that surround young people making decisions about higher education.

Note also that widening participation extended beyond the young people that are the focus of this paper. The idea of widening access to university for adult learners predates the Dearing Report by some decades; the former Labour government’s definition of widening participation took in people up to the age of 30. Nevertheless, the focus of this paper is the young entrants, generally defined as being those aged 18 or 19 on entry; who were the main focus of policy attention. Widening participation also incorporated work with disabled people, those within local authority care and certain minority ethnic communities, but these also lie outside the scope of the argument presented here.

**Policy analysis and policy success**

Spicker (2006:1) defines policy analysis as ‘examining policy – finding out and assessing what is happening; monitoring implementation; and evaluation, or finding out whether policies do what they are supposed to do.’ Of particular relevance here, he draws a distinction between policy aims – ‘what a policy is supposed to achieve’ – and policy goals – ‘a practical outcome, and a test of whether the aims are being achieved’(Spicker, 2006:49). It is therefore around policy goals that indicators and measurements of success are based, with Spicker (2006:87) drawing a distinction between the two:

A good measurement is accurate, precise, and reflects the characteristics of the issue that it is measuring. A good indicator is associated with the issue, robust, consistent over time and available.

This paper will assess the government-sanctioned statistic by which Aimhigher was judged within these definitions. More broadly, it will draw on the field of policy analysis to assess how the government’s intent was transmitted to become on-the-ground action. It will look particularly at the changing translation from the overarching policy aim (to produce a more socially-equal student population in higher education) to the specific policy goals associated with it (e.g. to increase attainment, aspirations and/or applications from certain groups). It will not seek to undertake an evaluation of Aimhigher, although some evidence from other studies is presented towards the end. Rather, it will focus on the transmission of the policy from government through agencies like the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) to chalkface workers and questions whether any meaningful evaluation of the efficacy and efficiency of Aimhigher could be drawn from the data collated by the government.

This form of mismatch is far from unique in social policy. For example, Ambrose (2005: 43) examines indicators used in a major urban regeneration programme against twelve quality criteria and finds them wanting; the criterion most frequently breached was that suggesting that ‘all indicators should be precisely specified and capable of accurate measurement in either quantitative or some acceptable qualitative form’. In similar vein, Bevan and Hood (2006) explore performance measurement problems in healthcare settings and conclude that inadequate specification leads to unintended consequences when such measures form the basis of imposed targets. Haas and Springer (1998:22) suggest that

educational programs … tend to have diffuse, long-term goals that defy ready measurement [such that] even when programs do deliver measurable outcomes, collecting such information tends to proceed independently of necessary links to program inputs, structure, and implementation.

Indeed, these critiques extend back to the origins of modern performance measurement, with Carter, Klein and Day (1992) exploring issues including how organisational complexity and uncertainty impact on the usability of indicators and the perceived effectiveness of a policy. They also suggest that indicators have to be clear, consistent, relevant to the policy and credible, thereby defining some measures as confusing ‘tin-openers’ that have the effect of ‘opening a can of worms’ rather than answering pertinent questions about the policy in question.

Ultimately, governments set out to achieve policy success that satisfies their own definitions, as well as those implicitly held by voters, stakeholders and other commentators. In considering whether Aimhigher was a policy success it is useful to draw on the work of McConnell (2010), who explores in depth the concept of what constitutes a ‘policy success’, finding that it is often contested, even when outcome measures are robust, reliable and valid. Working from a realist perspective, he presents a four-way typology of success (durable, conflicted, precarious and failure) across a variety of dimensions. In this instance, we will focus on the ‘programme success’, comprising how well Aimhigher met objectives, produced desired outcomes, created benefit for the target group and met policy domain criteria (ie accord with values held within the sector) – and specifically the extent to which these could be measured by the statistic that the government chose to employ (McConnell, 2010:46).

**Widening what, to whom?**

While there was general agreement on the need for action on the social class gap, there was not a consensus among policymakers or practitioners on what was needed and where efforts should be targeted. Social class can be seen as a proxy for different types of young people that needed to be engaged, but there were immediate problems with turning subjective assessments of social class into an actionable strategy – how were practitioners or schools to know which pupils fell into which socio-economic groups and were these the ‘right’ groupings (Thomas, 2001; Hatt, Baxter and Tate, 2005; Harrison and Hatt 2009a)?

The result was a plethora of interpretations emerging from government across a relatively short period of time. The Dearing Report talked about ‘those from socio-economic groups III to V’ (NCIHE, 1997: para 29), but by the time widening participation had its first formal government initiative, this had morphed into ‘bright young students from poorer backgrounds’ (DFEE, 2000:1) and those in ‘inner city comprehensives’(p2). The 2003 White Paper added new facets, including a focus on ‘less advantaged families’(DfES, 2003:2), ‘the most disadvantaged areas’ and ‘schools with low progression to higher education’ (both *ibid*:70). The document that laid out the initial ground rules for Aimhigher provided a list of over a dozen groups that were considered underrepresented in higher education, including ‘young people from neighbourhoods with lower than average HE participation’, ‘people from lower socio-economic groups’, ‘people living in deprived geographical areas’ and ‘people whose family have no experience of HE’(all HEFCE, 2004:12). In what was intended to be a definitive statement on targeting, Aimhigher was finally asked to reach out to ‘those from disadvantaged backgrounds who live in areas of relative deprivation where participation in higher education is low’(HEFCE, 2007). Even this formulation, which effectively moved Aimhigher towards being an area-based initiative rather than being based on individualised ideas of social class, had its critics (Harrison and Hatt, 2010).

This lack of clarity presented a real challenge to Aimhigher practitioners and others engaged in widening participation. There was effectively a menu of options available concerning which young people should be targeted by Aimhigher activities, based variously on the individual, their school or the area in which they lived:

* Socio-economic group (or social class), usually expressed through the NS-SEC system (National Statistics Socio-Economic Classification) which was introduced in 2001
* Family income (or economic disadvantage), which generally had no specific definition, except through the means-testing for additional financial support – latterly, the claiming of Free School Meals has gained currency (DBIS, 2011a)
* Certain schools, especially comprehensives that were serving deprived communities, especially in urban areas
* Deprived geographical areas, with inner city areas and remote rural/coastal areas often getting specifically mentioned
* Families with no history of higher education, though this often became confused in the case of reconstituted families (ie step-parents) or where there was experience of higher education within the extended family
* Areas with historically low participation in higher education, once figures became publicly available through HEFCE’s Participation Of Local AReas (POLAR) statistic (HEFCE, 2005, 2010a). (The original POLAR statistic was replaced in 2007 by an improved version known colloquially as ‘POLAR2’. All the figures quoted in this paper use the POLAR2 approach.)

There was little doubt that there was considerable overlap between these groups, but they all had a distinct flavour and more or less meaning within different Aimhigher partnerships. What was not made clear, until 2007, was which should be dominant in targeting activities and monitoring progress (HEFCE, 2007). Most partnerships convened data management groups to try to make sense of the plethora of information coming back from coalface practitioners, with a national network established to share practice more widely.

However, underpinning this discourse was a wider, and largely ignored, issue. While the Dearing Report (NCIHE 1997) had rammed home the message that there were strong disparities in access to higher education by social class, this issue of whether social class was actually the key determinant of those patterns was elided. Rather than working from the old logicians’ adage that ‘correlation doesn’t imply causation’, there was a rush to see social class as the root of the problem rather than an expression of it. Some writers (eg Chowdry *et al*, 2008; Coleman and Bekhradnia, 2011) have questioned this assumption, pointing out that social class patterns in the demand for higher education tend to disappear for those who have progressed into Level 3 study, conceptualising the patterns as being driven by differential access to high-quality early schooling rather than the more abstract notion of the occupation of one’s parents or a deficit model of educational motivation (or ‘poverty of aspiration’) in working class households. Nevertheless, and despite the variety of targets listed above, it was generally and tacitly assumed that social class was the *real* problem with which Aimhigher should be grappling.

Yet social class was, and remains, a contested concept. By the 1990s, the historical ideas of Marx (with immutable classes based on an individual’s relationship with the means of production) and Weber (with social status and political power as mediating factors) had been developed by later structuralist thinking on social class. In particular, the ideas of Pierre Bourdieu (eg Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990) had firmly taken root, with economic, cultural and social capital being theorised as the core components of social class and its intergenerational reproduction. However, Bourdieu also stressed the role of agency within social structures, such that individuals are able to blur, defy, subvert or transcend traditional class boundaries through their own narratives (also see Giddens, 1991; Beck, 1992). These ideas were developed by later poststructuralists/postmodernists who assert that social class is subjectively rooted in the individual’s experience of lived reality, effectively arguing that individuals are free, or even compelled, to construct and reconstruct their own classed identities (Bauman, 2000). Effectively, for Bauman, the old certainties around what social class is, where people are positioned and what it means for an individual’s ‘lived life’ have rapidly fallen away in late (or ‘liquid’) modernity. Nevertheless, the traditional categories of ‘middle’ and ‘working’ class remain strong in the literature around higher education in the UK (eg Archer, Hutchings and Ross, 2003; Reay, David and Ball, 2005; Evans, 2009; Reay, Crozier and Clayton, 2010) and retain a contemporary currency as an explanatory factor in educational decision-making, despite the more nuanced approaches offered by theorists or, indeed, the NS-SEC system.

The other confusion within Aimhigher’s mission as it evolved was whether its primary aim was to increase *aspirations* for higher education, the *applications* for a university place, the actual *admissions* to a university (otherwise referred to as *entries*) or the long-term *retention rates*. While this at first glance may appear to be largely a matter of semantics, this has transpired to be an important distinction, both in practice and in evaluation. For example, the official statistic used to measure widening participation (to which we will return in detail shortly) was based on data from the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) describing those young people who not only applied to higher education and were accepted, but who also stayed on their course until the 1st December in their first year (HESA 2012). Not surprisingly, Aimhigher partnerships generally demurred from seeing admissions or the first two months of academic life as being their concern (Chilosi *et al*, 2010), yet it would effectively prove to be part of the criteria on which they were assessed.

In keeping with the policy confusion about the targeting of Aimhigher’s activities, there was also a lack of clarity over time about what set of ‘actions’ by the student and/or university constituted a success. DfES (2003b) provided a four-stage policy framework: *attainment*, *aspiration*, *application* and *admission*. Attainment was seen as being an issue mainly for schools, with assistance from government programmes like Sure Start and Excellence in Cities. Admissions were identified as the exclusive purview of universities and only a limited part of the problem, with data presented that appeared to show that universities generally admitted students by social class in equal proportion to the applications received; nevertheless, a review was announced (Schwartz, 2004). This left aspirations and applications primarily to Aimhigher to influence, assisted by the creation of foundation degrees to offer new pathways into higher education.

However, by the following year the emphasis had shifted somewhat. Aimhigher was charged ‘to improve attainment, raise aspirations and otherwise facilitate progression to HE’(HEFCE, 2004:6). The focus was on ‘abilities and aspirations’ (p7), with the act of applying to university only forming a secondary part of the fourth objective laid out in the policy guidance. Despite this, the ‘key’ outcome measure was one of national participation (ie entry and early retention), although the level of university applications from the targeted groups did form the first of the ‘intermediate indicators of success’(p8), followed by improved school performance and staying on rates at 16. HEFCE (2007:5) then returned to ‘aspirations and achievements’as the primary focus for Aimhigher; indeed, no direct reference to applications appears in the first third of the document. This trend then reached its apogee in HEFCE’s guidance to Aimhigher partnerships at the start of the final funding period between 2008-2011 (HEFCE, 2008). This placed ‘attainment’ at the forefront of Aimhigher’s mission; this word appears nineteen times in the document, compared to six times for ‘aspirations’, only one mention of ‘applications’ and no occurrence of ‘admission’.

There were therefore very mixed messages to practitioners about the implementation of Aimhigher on the ground. Initially policy documents pointed them towards raising aspirations and increasing applications, but the latter was replaced over time by a new focus on pre-university attainment while simultaneously stating that the main indicator of success was to be a measure of entry and early retention – despite previously being told that admissions were outside their remit. This shift in focus also created a new difficulty for the assessment of success, as the targeting of younger pupils built in a temporal delay between the Aimhigher intervention and the desired behaviours underpinning the policy goals. In most instances, this was in the order of two or three years, but many Aimhigher partnerships designed activities and materials for pupils in the 11 to 14 age range and some even engaged with primary schools.

In summary, while there was a degree of consensus across policymakers and practitioners about the policy aim underpinning widening participation in general and Aimhigher in particular, there was significant confusion about the specific policy goals that were required to meet this aim and which could be objectively assessed as implementation proceeded. The uncertainty was twofold: which groups were to be targeted and whether the main goal for Aimhigher was attainment at school, aspirations for higher education or an application for a university place.

Aimhigher partnerships were left to interpret this confused ground as they saw best.

**Measuring (and mismeasuring) participation**

Despite the launch of the first national widening participation initiatives in 2000, it was not until 2007 that the government decided on an authoritative outcome measure. Statistics had been published annually (by HEFCE from 1996 to 2001 and by HESA from 2002 onwards) for the proportions of higher education entrants from lower socio-economic groups, state schools and ‘low participation neighbourhoods’ within the sector, but these did not take account of the size of the underlying populations. Furthermore, they showed inbuilt inertia due to the size of the underrepresented groups relative to the higher education sector as a whole. In other words, positive growth for these groups was masked or even negated by growth among students from groups traditionally associated with higher education, with both an expanding population and an expanding number of higher education places.

The outcome measure that the government elected to use for widening participation – and, by association, Aimhigher – was *Full-time Young Participation by Socio-Economic Classification* (FYPSEC) (Kelly and Cook, 2007). Using HESA data as its starting point, this measured the proportion of a proxy for the underlying population of 18 year olds who progressed into higher education within two years, subdivided by the socio-economic groups laid out by the NS-SEC schema. NS-SEC had been created for the 2001 Census and was designed to replace the familiar Registrar-General’s system of classification (variously rendered with categories named I/II/IIINM/IIIM/IV/V or A/B/C1/C2/D/E) which had been in use with minor changes since 1921. NS-SEC subdivided households into seven primary categories depending on the occupation of the ‘reference person’ who completed the census form. There was also an eighth category for the long-term unemployed and those who had never worked – but this was excluded from FYPSEC.

FYPSEC worked through a simple bifurcation into ‘higher’ (NS-SEC groups 1 to 3, broadly comprising professional and non-manual workers) and ‘lower’ (groups 4 to 7, broadly comprising manual workers and some small businesspeople) – these were viewed as analogous to the traditional ‘middle’ and ‘working’ class categories. The concept of widening participation was problematised as being the difference between these two groups. For example, in 2004, the ‘higher’ group had a participation rate of 27.0 per cent, while the ‘lower’ group was just 11.2 per cent. It was this difference that government policy – and retrospectively Aimhigher – was designed to close.

Table 1 about here

However, there were significant problems with FYPSEC, largely derived from the NS-SEC data on which it was based. The primary data source was the information provided by applicants on their Universities and College Admissions Service (UCAS) application form for a university place. As explored in detail in Harrison and Hatt (2009b), this was a deeply flawed data collection method, with over one-quarter of students missing data altogether and there being strong concerns about the validity of the data that did exist, as young people were not always well equipped to provide the information required. Similarly, a report from the National Audit Office (NAO) concluded that ‘significant gaps in the data provided by students to institutions and programmes reduce the reliance that can be placed on some measures of participation, particularly in relation to socio-economic background’(NAO, 2008:7), though it ironically professed high hopes for the then new approach offered by FYPSEC. Waller *et al* (2010) argued that NS-SEC categories were often incorrectly assigned and that there were not a good indicator of the ‘lived lives’ of the young person, with parental occupation not corresponding well to other factors like attitudes to education, income or social capital, and that the assignments tended to prioritise fathers’ occupations over those of the mothers. In addition, Bathmaker *et al* (2011) argued that the bifurcation point between NS-SEC groups 3 and 4 was questionable due to a ‘muddled middle’ of classed experiences, while Harrison and Hatt (2010) found that while NS-SEC was relatively well correlated with area-based measures of deprivation, it was far from deterministic – many ‘poor’ people lived in ‘rich’ areas and, to a lesser extent, *vice versa*. It is therefore unclear what exactly NS-SEC (and therefore FYPSEC) was measuring in this context. At best, it was a rough approximation of social class based on sketchy data and grounded in a somewhat out-of-date conceptualisation of a simple correlation between occupation, financial means, schooling and attitudes. At worse, it was an inadvertent means of confounding and obfuscating the real factors in determining educational decision-making.

A further weakness in the FYPSEC approach arose through the delay between the entry of the students on which the statistic was based and the publication of that statistic, which was generally in the order of nearly two years. So, for example, DBIS (2010) was published in July 2010, but reported data relating to students who entered higher education in autumn 2008. In effect, therefore, FYPSEC was reporting on the impact of Aimhigher as it had been two years previously, compromising their value by building a significant delay between cause and possible effect; on publication, the FYPSEC data was already ‘history’, with little bearing on the ‘there and then’ (Carter, Klein and Day, 1992). This was unfortunately a feature of the other measures that we will come on to examine too and the publication of timely widening participation data remains a challenge.

All in all, it was far from a surprise when the government announced in June 2011 that it was minded to abandon FYPSEC. The report on the consultation exercise that followed asserted that ‘The majority of respondents agreed that the FYPSEC measure was flawed and there are serious data issues that would prove difficult to resolve’(DBIS, 2011a: no page number). But had the damage already been done?

**What did FYPSEC say?**

The picture offered by FYPSEC, although generally positive, was far from inspiring – see Table 2. The social class gap showed some decline between 2002 and 2008, but this was mainly concentrated before the creation of Aimhigher in 2004. The proportion of young people from the lower socio-economic groups was growing (with the exception of in 2006, when it dropped slightly), but only slowly and with no marked change in pace corresponding to Aimhigher’s activities. Between 2004 and 2008, the participation rate for the lower group rose from 11.2 per cent to 13.7 per cent, amounting to an absolute rise of just 2.5 percentage points over four years despite an expenditure on Aimhigher of over £500 million. The social class gap dropped by just 1.7 percentage points in that period due to a small rise in participation among the higher socio-economic groups.

Table 2 about here

One of the particular weaknesses of the annual FYPSEC reports published by DBIS was a failure to express the *relative* growth in entrants from the ‘lower’ group. While the participation rate only rose by 2.5 percentage points, which critics like David Willetts could easily and credibly argue was unimpressive considering the resources deployed, this actually represents a 22 per cent relative increase in the propensity of young people from these groups to enter higher education. This alternative lens on FYPSEC immediately casts it in a new light which respects the very small base of participation from which Aimhigher was working. Expressed more colloquially, before Aimhigher, only one-in-nine young people from the lower groups went to university, but after four years this had changed to nearly one-in-seven; still not equitable compared to the over one-in-four for the higher socio-economic groups, but a more impressive form of expression than the bare 2.5 per cent rise reported in the annual statistical releases.

**Rivals to FYPSEC – what do they say?**

The paragraph above is not even yet a critique of FYPSEC – it is simply a recasting of the same data in a more favourable light. However, since the adoption of FYPSEC other measures have been published which suggest that FYPSEC may have underestimated widening participation outcomes.

In 2005, HEFCE first published its POLAR statistic for measuring the participation rate of geographical areas – most commonly expressed for local government wards. Each area is allotted to a five-point scale, with ‘1’ representing the lowest participation rate and ‘5’ representing the highest, such that these figures reflect equally-sized quintiles. HEFCE has continued to monitor participation from areas by POLAR categories and, in 2010, they published data about what had happened in the meantime (HEFCE, 2010a). They found that the number of entrants from the areas with the lowest participation had increased rapidly since 2005 and far more rapidly than in the areas which historically had the highest participation rates. Participation in those areas which had a POLAR statistic of 1 (i.e. the bottom 20 per cent of wards) rose from 14.5 per cent in 2004 to 18.0 per cent in 2008, with an estimated figure of 19.2 per cent for the following year. This was a 3.5 percentage point improvement in absolute terms over the same period as the FYPSEC analysis, translating to a 24 per cent relative growth. Including the 2009 figures too, these figures increase to 4.7 percentage points and 32 per cent respectively.

Data going back further into time suggested that Aimhigher had made a difference. As can be seen in Table 3, in the nine years between 1995 and 2003, the participation rate in the areas with a POLAR statistic of 1 rose by just 0.4 percentage points. Something happened in the mid 2000s to start this on a clear upward trend and Aimhigher was a possible causal factor, given the simultaneity. These deprived areas had traditionally had around one-in-seven of their young people going on to higher education, but after five years of Aimhigher, this had risen to nearly one-in-five. POLAR was telling a better story than FYPSEC and, most tellingly, the improvements were visibly accelerating in later years.

Table 3 about here

At the point at which the government was considering dropping FYPSEC, they published a new analysis of participation rates broken down by whether the young person was in receipt of Free School Meals (DBIS, 2011b). This facility is means-tested and made available to families with the lowest incomes – predominantly those that are mainly or wholly benefit-dependent. Ironically, this is a group that is largely excluded from the FYPSEC measure, which relies on the young person’s parents having an identifiable occupation and thereby excluding those not working due to disability, caring responsibilities or long-term unemployment.

Only a handful of years of data were available (from 2005 to 2008) as the analysis relied on the new technique of linking data on individuals from the National Pupil Database with that held by HESA in ways which had not previously been possible. The results again suggested that FYPSEC had underestimated changes in participation rates, in this case for young people from very low income households. The participation rate for those claiming Free School Meals had risen from 13 per cent in 2005 to 17 per cent in 2008, a 4 per cent absolute increase or a 31 per cent relative increase in a period one year less than the equivalent 2.5 per cent and 22 per cent figures for FYPSEC. Once again, there were also signs that the improvements were accelerating.

To recap, two alternative measures of participation showed markedly higher improvements for disadvantaged groups than FYPSEC and they both showed that these were accelerating towards the end of the time period. It is impossible to assign causality for this trend directly to Aimhigher with so many other educational policies being active at the same time, but the synchronicity is striking. It would certainly appear that Aimhigher was part of the policy mix that was leading to more of the ‘right’ young people going on to university, although it is important to note that the was also synchronous with improvements in GCSE results (Harrison, in press; Coleman and Bekhradnia, 2011), expanding the pool of possible applicants. Furthermore, as Thomas (2011) has argued, Aimhigher was also undertaking a portfolio of work that corresponds well with those activities that might be expected to positively impact on student retention and success, although this is an almost completely unresearched area.

**But are these even the right measures?**

The feature that binds all three of the measures of participation discussed above is that they refer to entrants into higher education. However, as noted previously, this is not wholly consistent with the mission of Aimhigher as interpreted by practitioners. For example, one typical partnership fixed its initial aims as being ‘to raise awareness and aspirations in order to motivate the target groups to enter higher education’ and ‘to complement and supplement the range of current initiatives designed to raise the achievement and competence of young people engaged in education, training and work’, with a contribution to national targets for participation only being listed third (Aimhigher West, 2004:1); the word ‘admissions’ is entirely absent from the document. Ensuring that these individuals were able to secure a place was not generally considered to be a valid objective for Aimhigher, which had no control over the admissions procedures of individual universities (Chilosi *et al*, 2010).

Admissions were a separate issue that vexed the government in the early 2000s. It was widely thought that universities, particularly the elite universities of the Russell Group, gave preferential treatment to ‘traditional’ types of students, broadly characterised as male, middle class and white, with academic qualifications (ie A Levels), preferably from a fee-paying school. This issue was highlighted by media coverage of high-achieving young people finding it impossible to get a place at top UK universities (for example, see Ryle, Ahmed and Bright, 2000). It was felt that universities were not doing enough to break down barriers to new types of students and allow them to compete on an equal basis (DfES, 2003a). This issue provided organisations like the Sutton Trust with a hot topic for a succession of reports through the 2000s focused on the putative ‘missing’ students (Sutton Trust, 2000; 2004).

The government therefore asked Steven Schwartz, then vice-chancellor of Brunel University, to lead a review of higher education admissions policies and procedures. After deliberation, Schwartz concluded that the system was ‘generally fair’ with ‘room for improvement’ (Schwartz, 2004:4), effectively leading to few meaningful changes within the sector. The report stopped well short of recommending positive measures for young people targeted by Aimhigher or other widening participation initiatives, although it did weakly suggest that universities could use a broader range of criteria than just academic attainment at school; a challenge to which few elite universities have yet risen (but see Hoare and Johnston, 2011). As a result, little seems to have changed since Schwartz, especially in terms of ensuring fair access to the top institutions (Harrison, 2011).

This, of course, highlights a contradiction. Aimhigher had been charged to increase *aspirations for* higher education (or, latterly, school attainment), but the parallel policy debate about *admissions into* higher education had failed to make much progress on if and how they might gain entry. Indeed, the Sutton Trust continues to report on the phenomenon of the ‘wasted talent’ of well-qualified young people who do not progress to higher education (Sutton Trust, 2008). Furthermore, Aimhigher was being judged through an outcome measure of entrants and not applications – its efficacy was being evaluated through a statistic which was heavily influenced by processes over which it had little control. This distinction is drawn out further by empirical studies like that from Chilosi *et al* (2010), which showed a positive impact from Aimhigher activities on the likelihood of a young person applying to university, but no impact on actual admissions.

If we turn to national figures from UCAS concerning the applications for higher education over the lifespan of Aimhigher, this puts the unfairness of this contradiction into sharp focus. It is important to note, that while UCAS handles the vast majority of higher education applications, there is a minority of individuals who enter university through non-mainstream pathways (eg progression within further education colleges) who are outside this process. These are likely to be disproportionately from those groups targeted by Aimhigher, so the figures presented below should be viewed as a possible underestimate of reality.

Table 4 about here

Table 4 and Figure 1 show a very rapid increase in the application rate (ie the proportion of the 18 year old cohort to make an application to higher education) between 2004 and 2008 in the 20 per cent most deprived neighbourhoods in England, as measured by the 2007 Index of Multiple Deprivation (DCLG 2007). The absolute rise was 6.4 per cent, representing a relative rise of 32 per cent over the same period that FYPSEC showed a 22 per cent rise. This growth continued into 2010, with the application rate rising to 31.7 per cent – equivalent to a 62 per cent increase in applications since 2004. In 2004, fewer than one in five young people from the most deprived communities sought to enter higher education, but six years later this had become almost one in three. This is shown in contrast to a much slower relative rate of growth among the 20 per cent least deprived neighbourhoods in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1 about here

2006 saw the implementation of the 2004 Higher Education Act and specifically a near-tripling of tuition fees and the introduction of bursaries for students from low income backgrounds. Despite fears (eg Pennell and West, 2005; Callender and Jackson, 2005; Jones and Thomas, 2005) that these changes would lead to a rapid decline in applications and admissions from certain student groups, Figure 1 shows graphically that this was not the case. In fact it was students from more affluent backgrounds who saw the strongest decline in demand in 2006. While the growth in demand from the most deprived neighbourhoods did slow, applications continued to rise overall – by 0.3 per cent in 2006 compared to 2005. This trend is also borne out by the data from FYPSEC (in Table 2) and POLAR (in Table 3): an important component in the closing of the social class gap was a drop in applications from more affluent backgrounds in the face of rising costs. A full discussion of this phenomenon is outside the scope of this paper, though it may be hypothesised that this group were able to exercise other positive choices at 18 outside of higher education which were not available to the widening participation groups.

Thus applications for higher education from the most disadvantaged groups grew considerably more quickly than did admissions. Taking into account the whole lifespan of Aimhigher, the proportion of young people applying to university was over half as much again when it was abolished as it was when it was created. This does open up a wider issue: what happened to those young people, enthused by Aimhigher and other higher education outreach activities, who did apply for a university place, but who were unable to secure one?

Doubtless some will have failed to achieve the grades necessary for entry, either to their chosen course or to the sector as a whole. However, as Coleman and Bekhradnia (2011) note, 2009 marked something of a watershed in university admissions. It was the first year in which there was a significant excess of demand over supply, with more qualified potential students seeking places than there were funded places available. As a result, the ‘Robbins principle’ (Robbins, 1963), that higher education should be available to all with the potential to benefit from it, was quietly dropped after 45 years. At the time of writing, data appear not yet to have been analysed to understand how young people from disadvantaged backgrounds fared within this new competitive arena, but it raises a vital question about what happens to those individuals who were inspired by Aimhigher, but who were unable to pass the final hurdle. This is a different form of ‘wasted talent’ to that highlighted by the Sutton Trust (2008), but no less interesting or important.

It also poses an ethical question for the sector looking forwards about whether it is fair for the state and the higher education sector to raise expectations that may not be fulfilled through widening participation initiatives. In particular, it highlights the unfairness of the admissions system, where A Levels are heavily and instrumentally valorised despite data being readily available to show that young people from more deprived backgrounds outperform their more privileged peers on average given the same entry qualifications (PFAP, 2009). Were they following the principles of evidence-based practice, universities would be clamouring to admit those whose passage towards higher education has been challenging rather than those whose families have been able to secure the top schooling through private education or manipulation of the state system (Ball, 2003).

**Aimhigher and causality**

Having looked in some detail at the macro trends in participation, it is important to note that these can never establish a direct correlation between Aimhigher and participation rates to any degree of certainty. The creation and development of Aimhigher coincides with a rapid acceleration in entrants from low participation neighbourhoods, but this could be nothing more than a coincidence – in the colloquial sense of the word. It also, for example, coincides with a rapid improvement in school results and post-compulsory staying-on rates, effectively expanding the pool of potential university applicants. Harrison (in press) finds that GCSE pass rates, ethnic mix and labour market conditions are significant predictors for application rates at the local level, although there is variation that suggests a role for localised approaches like Aimhigher.

In an ideal world, crude constructs like FYPSEC (or even POLAR) would not be necessary for the success or otherwise of Aimhigher to be assessed. Instead, Aimhigher would be more adequately evaluated through robust studies that focused on a direct causal link between interventions and decisions to apply to university (or the myriad other objectives allotted to the organisation). However, Aimhigher simply was not operating in this ideal world. Aside from the poor specification of the Aimhigher mission explored in the first half of this paper, there are a number of key challenges to evaluating Aimhigher that were not adequately assessed in the policy development process:

a) *Time elapsed between intervention and outcome.*While activity in the initial years of Aimhigher tended to focus on the later years of school, this was increasingly replaced by interventions geared towards younger age groups, even down to primary level. For many components of the Aimhigher programme, the time elapsed between intervention and decision to enter higher education was in the order of five years. This timescale not only meant that there was a politically-unacceptable lag between inputs and outcomes, but also that the number of possible confounding factors grew with each passing year.

b) *Highly localised portfolios*. A key feature of Aimhigher was that the localised partnerships had almost complete autonomy over the portfolio of activities that they offered and how they were delivered. As a result, the reality of Aimhigher on-the-ground was radically different depending on where it was examined and at what point in time. There was a degree of convergence in later years, but an evaluation would need to accept that Aimhigher could succeed in some areas and fail in others; this equally holds for individual activities within the portfolio.

c) *The nature of the ‘participant’.* One of the unresolved issues faced by Aimhigher and similar outreach work is to define who interventions are aimed at. The primary goal is to change behaviour among those young people from under-represented groups with the ability to attend higher education at some point years in the future, but who would otherwise not do so. However, there is an immediate issue with ‘deadweight’ (those who would have gone even without the intervention) and ‘leakage’ (to groups already overrepresented; Thomas, 2001). The typical method of selecting which individuals should be invited to take part in, for example, a university visit is for the school to identify a group felt to have the potential to benefit, drawing a non-random distinction between participant and non-participant, which is then exacerbated by a degree of self-selection by the young person when they decide whether they wish to participate. This selection bias is exacerbated by prosaic grass-roots considerations such as access, funding, time capacity and location, such that the group targeted by Aimhigher and the actual participant group might be very different in reality (Thomas, 2001; Hatt, Baxter and Tate, 2005), making the construction of valid control groups problematic in practice. A resulting challenge discovered by Aimhigher partnerships and the national evaluation project (Passy and Morris, 2010) was the difficulty in getting usable and reliable data about young people from schools and parents. These features place Aimhigher in a very different context to, say, medical evaluations, where the participants are well-defined, known and held in controlled conditions, and where access to their data is not mediated through others.

d) *The nature of ‘participation’***.** Continuing the analogy with medical evaluation above, it is known in this circumstance what ‘dose’ the participant has undergone. With Aimhigher, this principle was blurred. Some individuals were exposed to a series of interventions, while others might only be exposed to a single one. Similarly, some interventions were rigidly bounded (eg summer schools), while others were mutable and heavily dependent on context (eg student tutoring). It is therefore challenging to define an Aimhigher ‘participant’ in a holistic sense. Clearly, individual interventions could be evaluated (summer schools have been most closely examined; HEFCE, 2010b), but an overall evaluation of the Aimhigher programme was vexed by the complexity of recording exactly what participants had participated in.

e) *Changing definitions and data gaps*.One feature of the field of widening participation has been that the data used in targeting, monitoring and evaluation have been on shifting sands throughout the period, with significant gaps. This phenomenon has been explored to some extent in the earlier part of the paper, but the problem was wider and broader. For example, data relating to young people coming through further education routes is very sparse and difficult to link to other data (Chowdry *et al*, 2008). Similarly, national indicator definitions have been prone to change throughout the lifespan of Aimhigher, meaning that longitudinal datasets are incomplete or open to misuse (eg HESA data on social class; HESA, 2012).

f) *Complexity of the field*.All fields of public policy are complex and rarely unicausal in nature. However, widening participation in the 2000s was buffeted by a series of initiatives and contextual factors making the isolation of any Aimhigher impact problematic. For example, radical improvements in school outcomes, the creation of foundation degrees, changes to financial support for low income students, academisation, qualifications reform and the global recession are all likely to have played a part in shaping the demand for

higher education.

g) *Ethical considerations***.** Randomised controlled trials are generally seen as the pinnacle of quantitative research, but they remain not widely used within educational research, not least due to ethical considerations about effectively excluding some ‘deserving’ participants from positive interventions in order to form control groups. This would appear to run counter to the professional standards established by the British Educational Research Association (see para 24 of BERA 2011), as well as raising valid questions about fairness at the micro level if talented young people were told they couldn’t attend a valued summer school because they were ‘controls’.

All this is not to argue that a robust, causal and national evaluation of Aimhigher was not *desirable*, but that circumstances militated against this being *achievable* within politically plausible timescales, resource envelopes and ethical guidelines. In particular, more clarity at the creation of Aimhigher about what could and could not be evaluated would have presented a more fruitful field for subsequent research.

**How much credit does Aimhigher deserve?**

Bearing this in mind, there are data suggesting, if not proving, a causal link between Aimhigher and widened participation. A series of official nationwide studies of the precursor to Aimhigher, undertaken by the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER), suggested a modest positive correlation between participation in widening participation activities and both school attainment and application rates (eg Emmerson *et al*, 2005; Morris

and Rutt, 2005; Morris, Rutt and Yeshanew, 2005; Morris and Rutt, 2006; Morris, Rutt and Mehta, 2009). This was supported by national survey data from universities, colleges and workbased learning providers, who reported high levels of satisfaction with Aimhigher and a belief that it was becoming effective at changing progression patterns (Bowers-Brown *et al*, 2006). An additional report from the NFER into Aimhigher in its post-2004 form concluded that quantitative data provided by Aimhigher partnerships was not sufficiently robust for analysis, but provided additional qualitative analysis supporting the efficacy of the programme (Passy and Morris, 2010).

Since 2004, Aimhigher area partnerships and regional offices continuously produced evidence about the impact of the various widening participation activities and interventions. Over the lifetime of Aimhigher, this amassed an impressive corpus of data. The end-of-life systematic review by Moore and Dunworth (2011) synthesised forty-one separate localised studies examining the impact of Aimhigher on ‘the combination of factors that underpin progression: aspirations, awareness and attainment’(p3) and included tracking studies, administrative data analyses, programme evaluations and teacher and pupil feedback surveys. They concluded that Aimhigher activities had had a positive impact on attainment at both 16 and 18, with participating young people and schools showing markedly higher outcomes than those not participating. Qualitative studies provided ‘evidence from pupils and staff [that]recorded improvements in motivation, self-esteem, confidence, enthusiasm, aspirations, interest in higher education, communication skills, team work and attainment’ (p15), further noting that ‘Aimhigher interventions have made the most impact for low and mid attaining schools’ (p17).

However, the studies cited in Moore and Dunworth (2011) suffer from many of the methodological challenges outlined above. In particular, the concepts of ‘participant’ and ‘participation’ are often ill-defined and there is generally an absence of control groups. Also, for the most part, the studies reviewed are small-scale, highly localised and/or often based heavily on subjective feedback from teachers and young people.

The extent to which this type of evidence is meaningful has been the subject of debate for the last fifteen years and a full exploration of this lies outside the scope of this paper. On the one hand, some argue that robust quantitative methods are needed to establish causal links (colloquially, ‘what works’) in a scientific way (eg Hillage *et al*, 1998; Hargreaves, 1999). Others respond by asserting that such studies can only provide a partial or misleading picture, especially where they are poorly specified or underestimate the complexity of the field, arguing instead for a continuing role for qualitative studies, practitioner reflexivity and systematic reviews (eg Hodkinson, 2004; Lather, 2004; Oancea and Pring, 2008). With specific reference to widening participation, Gorard *et al* (2006) were able shrilly to dismiss numerous studies in the early years of Aimhigher as unscientific and invalid, lacking clear methodology and failing to probe causality. In doing so, Gorard *et al* sought to lay out a future research agenda for Aimhigher – one that has barely materialised. However, Doyle and Griffin (2012) provide a strong critique of this reductionist epistemology, arguing that it respects neither the complexities of widening participation nor the professionalism of practitioners working within it.

In what appears to be the only peer-reviewed study that begins to approach the exacting standards of Gorard *et al*, Chilosi *et al* (2010) found that involvement in a ‘high-intensity’ Aimhigher activity led to a 4 per cent increase in the likelihood of a young person applying to university (with a similar improvement in attainment at 16), although the research design was beset with shortcomings; some acknowledged, but others not. In a quantitative study, HEFCE (2010b) found that participants in Aimhigher summer schools achieved significantly better in their GCSEs and were more likely to progress to post-compulsory study and university than similar peers.

In the rush to discover ‘what works’, it is easy to forget that the impact of Aimhigher may be slow-burning, additive, counterintuitive or even perverse (McConnell, 2010). A ‘stimulus-response’ model of efficacy only captures a subset of the value of Aimhigher in relation to public expenditure. The immediate impact of an Aimhigher intervention may actually be to discourage a young person from making an application (eg by getting them to consider their career path more carefully), with the true positive effect not manifesting itself for many years (eg by making a more informed application for a path that suits them better). There is also a wider societal value in the long-term working relationships between schools and universities that were seeded initially by collaboration on Aimhigher activities (Doyle and Griffin, 2012). This integration between secondary (and further) and higher education was previously missing for many schools and colleges, especially those serving poorer neighbourhoods and with lower attainment profiles that have not historically been lucrative for recruitment. Through Aimhigher, every school and college in the country was effectively offered some direct link to a university – many for the first time.

It is instructive to remember just how complex is the maelstrom of a young person’s decision making processes around education, training and work. Aimhigher is but one strand in the warp and weft of real life, with educational attainment, peer pressure, family attitudes, geography, demography, social class, school ethos and a score of other influences all being part of the rich fabric. To expect to find a direct causal relationship between Aimhigher’s activities and entry to higher education appears somewhat idealistic and simplistic.

Ultimately, there appears to be no published study to date that provides robust evidence of such a link; equally, there are none that have failed to find one. Chilosi *et al*’s (2010) limited work and HEFCE’s (2010b) focused study suggest a positive causal role for Aimhigher, and this is supported by a strong compelling accumulation of local, subjective and qualitative evidence which sees young people describing improved school results, raised aspirations and intentions to apply to higher education as a result of Aimhigher interventions, echoed by the professionals working with them (Hatt, Baxter and Tate, 2008; Passy and Morris, 2010; Moore and Dunworth, 2011). It would appear fair to assert, therefore, that such evidence as does exists implies that Aimhigher was causal to some degree in the application and admission patterns described earlier in this paper.

**Aims, goals, measures and indicators**

Returning to Spicker’s (2006) definition of good measures and indicators in the context of policy analysis cited above, it is difficult to see how FYPSEC met either definition. While it demonstrably had some validity in measuring social class and the patterns in higher education participation associated with it, the large proportion of missing data and its inability to capture data from the most deprived households undermined its accuracy and precision. However, even its validity was limited by questions over whether the eight-point NS-SEC scale based on parental occupation data was really capturing the important components of social class as they relate to educational decision-making and whether it was hiding as much as it was illuminating.

FYPSEC’s credentials as an indicator are similarly problematic. While the data was readily available through its systematic collection by HESA, broadly consistent over time and robust within its own terms, the main issue with conceptualising FYPSEC as an indicator is whether it was really associated with the operation of Aimhigher and its policy goals. As has been demonstrated using textual analysis of the key policy documents, the outcome on which Aimhigher was asked to focus its efforts moved over time from aspirations and applications for higher education to attainment at school. This latter policy goal is very distant in meaning from FYPSEC’s construction around university entrants, especially given the excess demand noted in recent years. It is further undermined by the built-in time delay between Aimhigher activities being delivered to 11 to 16 year olds and their decision of whether to participate in higher education at 18 – as well as by the two year delay in publication.

Returning also to McConnell’s (2010) definition of ‘programme success’, the reviewed evidence from practitioners and stakeholders suggests that Aimhigher’s implementation provided respected outputs that accorded with the values of the sector (i.e. complied with the policy domain criteria). It met objectives in terms of providing a nationwide menu of activities that were connected to the policy aim and with significant effort expended to target this at the appropriate groups. Assessing outcomes and benefits to the target group were more vexed. Evaluative data suggests positive associations between Aimhigher (and predecessor) activities and the various different types of policy goal on which the organisation was asked to focus, including attainment, educational and occupational aspirations and the predisposition of individuals to apply to higher education. The extent to which these were manifesting in real changes in attitude or behaviour remains moot, not least as no compelling assessment of deadweight (activities focused on people who would have entered higher education) and leakage (activities focused on people outside the target groups) have been forthcoming.

Fundamentally, the failure of FYSPEC to act as either a good measure or a good indicator has meant that the success of Aimhigher in terms of outcomes and benefits was contested and controversial from the outset. As a result, I suggest that Aimhigher most closely meets the criteria for McConnell’s category of a ‘precarious’ success. More compelling quantitative evidence about outcomes and benefits – perhaps on attainment or applications – could well have transformed this into a ‘conflicted’ or even a ‘durable’ success (McConnell, 2010:67). All in all, it remains likely that Aimhigher was making a useful contribution to the government’s policy aim of widening participation, even if the specific policy goals remained unclear, mutable through time and poorly attached to the statistic designed to evaluate them.

**Conclusions**

In this paper, I have argued that FYPSEC was the wrong statistic to evaluate the success of Aimhigher. It was based on admissions (over which Aimhigher had no control) and not attainment, aspirations or applications. It was ill-conceived, based on a flawed data collection model which generated unreliable data about a concept which was of debatable relevance to educational progression. It was late arriving, only being adopted by government three years after the creation of Aimhigher and with little consultation with practitioners – and then reported data that were two years out of date. It explicitly excluded the benefit-dependent households at the very bottom of the social ladder, which were those most keenly targeted by Aimhigher activities. It took no account of the built-in delay in success of those Aimhigher activities that targeted young people at the bottom end of the age range, who might take five years or more to arrive in higher education. It didn’t consider the wider positive impacts on student retention and degree outcomes or on valuable school-university ties. It was also, unfortunately, the outcome measure that showed the most modest progress on widening participation among the range of possible measures and indicators that might have been used.

I have also argued that this was partly, at least, born out of the government’s confusion over whose participation was to be widened and a failure to translate the policy aim into coherent and operationalisable policy goals. Policy documents went from dotting around between definitions in the early 2000s, to an all-inclusive menu at the creation of Aimhigher, to an ultrafunctionalist area-based approach which did not match the statistic adopted to measure it. There was a clear failure in not establishing early on what the targeted group(s) was/were, the nature of the outcome(s) desired and how this/these were to be measured. These concepts evolved organically over time and generally without involving Aimhigher and other widening participation practitioners. It is difficult to conceive a less auspicious genesis for a major national policy thrust costing nearly £1 billion. Nevertheless, indicators other than FYPSEC have shown a 62 per cent increase in applications (Figure 1) and a 32 per cent increase in admissions (Table 3) among young people from the most deprived communities over the first five or six years of Aimhigher’s life.

With the election of the Coalition government in May 2010, widening participation policy has taken a new turn. There are clear tensions between the two coalition parties, with the Conservatives framing the discourse in terms of meritocracy while the Liberal Democrats, as junior partners, employing the language of social justice to frame their own policy approach, as seen in the debates over student funding. The adoption of participation rates among young people previously claiming Free School Meals as the main national statistic is unlikely to be unproblematic given known shortcomings in its methodology and what it measures (Hobbs and Vignoles, 2007). This is not helped by a continuing failure to resolve the overarching questions presented near the beginning of this paper: widening what, to whom?

It would be churlish in the extreme to suggest with any certainty that the adoption of FYPSEC was directly responsible for the demise of Aimhigher. There were many other threads to the ultimate decision to cancel the programme in November 2010; it had already had its funding nearly halved from the original levels and whispers about value for money and on the ground results had started by 2006. Despite massive support from professionals, parents and young people, robust causal evidence for efficacy was lacking and even the group commissioned to undertake a national evaluation found it impossible to do so. The 2010 General Election was dominated by an atmosphere of public sector spending cuts from all the major political parties, before they materialised into the austerity measures of the Coalition government. However, it *is* reasonable to note that FYPSEC and its public presentation cannot have done Aimhigher any favours, being symptomatic of a wider policy implementation failure. It was difficult for ministers to point to the statistic as evidence of Aimhigher’s efficacy and this can only have made it easier for the final decision to be taken, thereby sealing its fate.

**Address for correspondence**

Neil Harrison, Department of Education, University of the West of England, Coldharbour Lane, Bristol, United Kingdom, BS16 1QY. E-mail: neil.harrison@uwe.ac.uk.

**References**

Aimhigher West (2004) *Aimhigher West Area Strategic Plan: 2004-2005*, Gloucester: Aimhigher West

Ambrose, P (2005) .Urban regeneration: who defines the indicators?., in Taylor, D and Balloch, S (eds) *The politics of evaluation: participation and policy implementation,* Bristol: Policy Press

Archer, L, Hutchings, M and Ross, A (2003) *Higher education and social class: issues of exclusion and inclusion*, London: Routledge Falmer

Attwood, R (2010) ‘Mind the gap’, *Times Higher Education Supplement* 25 February 2010. Accessed online at www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/story.asp?sectioncode=26andstorycode=410531

Ball, S (2003) *Class strategies and the educational market: the middle classes and social advantage,* London: Routledge Falmer.

Bathmaker, A-M, Ingram, N and Waller, R (2011) Higher education, social class and the mobilisation of capital*,* Paper presented at British Educational Research Association Annual Conference, London, 8 September 2011.

Bauman, Z (2000) *Liquid modernity*. Cambridge: Polity

Baxter, A, Tate, J and Hatt, S (2007) ‘From policy to practice: pupils' responses to widening participation initiatives’, *Higher Education Quarterly* 61: 266-283

Beck, U (1992) *Risk society: towards a new modernity,* London: Sage

Bevan, G and Hood, C (2006) ‘What’s measured is what matters: targets and gaming in the English public health care systems’, *Public Administration* 84: 517-538

Bourdieu, P and Passeron, J-C (1990) *Reproduction in education, society and culture* (2nd edn), London: Sage

Bowers-Brown, T, McCaig, C, Harvey, L and Stevens, A (2006) *National evaluation of Aimhigher: survey of higher education institutions, further education colleges and work-based learning providers,* Bristol : HEFCE

British Educational Research Association [BERA] (2011) *Ethical guidelines for educational research*, London: BERA

Callender, C and Jackson, J (2005) ‘Does the fear of debt deter students from higher education?’, *Journal of Social Policy* 34: 509-540

Carter, N, Klein, R and Day, P (1992) *How do organisations measure success: the use of performance indicators in government,* London: Routledge

Chilosi, D, Noble, M, Broadhead, P, and Wilkinson, M (2010) ‘Measuring the effect of Aimhigher on schooling attainment and higher education applications and entries’, *Journal of Further and Higher Education* 34: 1-10

Chowdry, H, Crawford, C, Dearden, L, Goodman, A and Vignoles, A (2008) *Widening participation in higher education using linked administrative data*, IFS Reports R69, London: Institute for Fiscal Studies.

Coleman, R and Bekhradnia, B (2011) *Higher education supply and demand to 2020*, Oxford: Higher Education Policy Institute

Department for Business, Innovation and Skills [DBIS] (2010) *Full-time young participation by socio-economic class (FYPSEC), 2010 update,* London: DBIS

Department for Business, Innovation and Skills [DBIS] (2011a) *Findings from the public consultation on statistics that measure the progress of children from disadvantaged backgrounds to higher education,* London: DBIS

Department for Business, Innovation and Skills [DBIS] (2011b) *Analysis of progression rates for young people in England by free school meal receipt,* London: DBIS

Department for Education and Employment [DFEE] (2000) *The excellence challenge,* London: DFEE

Department for Education and Skills [DfES] (2003a) *The future of higher education*, London: Department for Education and Skills.

Department for Education and Skills [DfES] (2003b) *Widening participation in higher education*, London: Department for Education and Skills

Department of Communities and Local Government [DCLG] (2007) *The English Indices of Deprivation 2007: summary*,*.* London: DCLG

Doyle, M and Griffin, M (2012) ‘Raised aspirations and attainment? A review of the impact of Aimhigher (2004-2011) on widening participation in higher education in England’, *London Review of Education* 10: 75-88

Emmerson, C, Frayne, C, McNally, S and Silva, O (2005) *The early impact of Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge on pre-16 outcomes: an economic evaluation,* Slough: NfER

Evans, S (2009) ‘In a different place: working class girls and higher education’, *Sociology* 43: 340-355

Giddens, A (1991) *Modernity and self-identity: self and society in the late modern age*, Cambridge: Polity

Gorard, S, Smith, E, Thomas, L, Adnett, N and Slack, K (2006) *Review of widening participation research: addressing the barriers to participation in higher education*, Bristol: Higher Education Funding Council for England.

Haas, P and Springer, J (1998) *Applied policy research: concepts and cases*, London: Taylor and Francis.

Hargreaves, D (1999) ‘Revitalising educational research: lessons from the past and proposals for the future’, *Cambridge Journal of Education* 29: 239-249

Harrison, N (2011) ‘Have the changes introduced by the 2004 Higher Education Act made higher education admissions in England wider and fairer?’**,** *Journal of Education Policy* 26 : 449-468

Harrison, N (in press) Modelling the demand for higher education by local authority area in England using academic, economic and social data, *British Educational Research Journal* (awaiting publication)

Harrison, N and Hatt, S (2009a) ‘“Targeting disadvantaged learners”: will we really narrow the social class gap in participation by targeting our most deprived communities first?’, *Journal of Access Policy and Practice* 6: 61-80

Harrison, N and Hatt, S (2009b) ‘Knowing the ‘unknowns’: who are the full-time undergraduates whose social class is not known and what are the implications for widening participation policy?’, *Journal of Further and Higher Education* 33 : 347-357

Harrison, N and Hatt, S (2010) ‘“Disadvantaged learners”: who are we targeting? Understanding the targeting of widening participation activity using geo-demographic data from Southwest England’, *Higher Education Quarterly* 64 : 65-88

Harrison, N and Hatt, S (2012) ‘Expensive and failing? The role of student bursaries in widening participation and fair access in England’, *Studies in Higher Education* 37: 695-712

Hatt, S, Baxter, A and Tate, J (2005) ‘Who benefits from widening participation? A study of targeting in the South West of England’, *Journal of Further and Higher Education* 29: 341-351

Hatt, S, Baxter, A and Tate, J (2008) ‘‘The best government initiative in recent years’. Teachers' perceptions of the Aimhigher programme in the South West of England’, *Journal of Further and Higher Education* 32: 129-138

Higher Education Funding Council for England [HEFCE] (2004) *Aimhigher: guidance notes for Integration*, Report 2004/08, Bristol: HEFCE

Higher Education Funding Council for England [HEFCE] (2005) *Young participation in higher education*, Report 2005/03, Bristol: HEFCE.

Higher Education Funding Council for England [HEFCE] (2007) *Higher education outreach: targeting disadvantaged learners,* Report 2007/12, Bristol: HEFCE

Higher Education Funding Council for England [HEFCE] (2008) *Guidance for Aimhigher partnerships: updated for the 2008-2011 programme*, Report 2008/05, Bristol: HEFCE.

Higher Education Funding Council for England [HEFCE] (2010a) *Trends in young participation in higher education: core results for England*, Report 2010/03, Bristol: HEFCE

Higher Education Funding Council for England [HEFCE] (2010b) *Aimhigher summer schools: participants and progression to higher education*, Report 2010/32, Bristol: HEFCE

Higher Education Funding Council for England [HEFCE] (2011) Detailed data underpinning Report 2010/03, provided by personal communication

Higher Education Statistics Agency [HESA] (2012) *Performance indicators: definitions,* Accessed at www.hesa.ac.uk/index.php?option=com\_content&task=view&id=2379

Hillage, J, Pearson, R, Anderson, A and Tamkin, P (1998) *Excellence in research on schools,* DFEE Research Report RR74, Sudbury: DFEE

Hobbs, G and Vignoles, A (2007) *Is free schools meals status a valid proxy for socio-economic status (in schools research)*?, London : Centre for the Economics of Education, London School of Economics

Hoare, A and Johnston, R (2011) ‘Widening participation through admissions policy - a British case study of school and university performance’, *Studies in Higher Education* 36: 21-41

Hodkinson, P (2004) ‘Research as a form of work: expertise, community and methodological objectivity’, *British Educational Research Journal* 30: 9-26

Jones, R and Thomas, L (2005) ‘The 2003 UK Government higher education White Paper: a critical assessment of its implications for the access and widening participation agenda’, *Journal of Education Policy* 20: 615-630

Kelly, K and Cook, S (2007) *Full-time young participation by socio-economic class: a new widening participation measure in higher education,* DfES Report RR806, London: DfES

Lather, P (2004) ‘Scientific research in education: a critical perspective’, *British Educational Research Journal* 30: 759-772

McConnell, A (2010) *Understanding policy success: rethinking public policy,* Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan

Moore, J and Dunworth, F (2011) *Review of evidence from Aimhigher Area Partnerships of the impact of Aimigher*, Available online at www.aimhigher.ac.uk/practitioner

Morris, M and Rutt, S (2005) *Evaluation of Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge: aspirations to higher education: one year on*,*.* Slough: NfER

Morris, M and Rutt, S (2006) *Evaluation of Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge: longitudinal pupil analysis report,* Slough: NfER

Morris, M, Rutt, S and Yeshanew, T (2005) *Evaluation of Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge: pupil outcomes one year on,* Slough: NfER

Morris, M, Rutt, S and Mehta, P (2009) *The longer term impact of Aimhigher: tracking individuals,* Slough: NfER

National Audit Office [NAO] (2008) *Widening participation in higher education*, London: National Audit Office

National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education [NCIHE] (1997) *Higher education in the learning society* (known as the Dearing Report), Norwich: HMSO

Oancea, A and Pring, R (2008) ‘The importance of being thorough: on systematic accumulations of ‘what works’ in education research’, *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 42: 15-39

Office for National Statistics [ONS] (2011) Data on Small Area Population Estimates provided on request by personal communication

Passy, R and Morris, M (2010) *Evaluation of Aimhigher: learner attainment and progression*, Slough: NfER

Pennell, H and West, A (2005) ‘The impact of increased fees on participation in higher education in England’, *Higher Education Quarterly* 59: 127-137

Panel on Fair Access to the Professions [PFAP] (2009) *Unleashing aspiration: the final report of the Panel on Fair Access to the Professions* (also known as the Milburn Report), London: Cabinet Office

Reay, D, Crozier, G and Clayton, J (2010) ‘‘Fitting in’ or ‘standing out’: working-class students in UK higher education’, *British Educational Research Journal* 36: 107-124

Reay, D, David, M and Ball, S (2005) *Degrees of choice: class, race, gender and higher education*, Stoke-on-Trent: Trentham

Robbins, L (1963) *Higher education* (known as the Robbins Report), Cmnd 2165. London: HMSO

Ryle, S, Ahmed, K and Bright, M (2000) ‘The war of Laura’s rejection’, *The Observer* 28 May 2000. Accessed at

www.guardian.co.uk/education/2000/may/28/highereducation.oxbridgeandelitism1

Sanders, C (2006) ‘Tories’ £2bn access drive is a 'failure'’, *Times Higher Education Supplement* 28 July 2006 Accessed at www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/story.asp?sectioncode=26andstorycode=204531

Schwartz, S (2004) *Fair admissions to higher education: recommendations for good practice,* Nottingham: Department for Education and Skills

Spicker, P (2006) *Policy analysis for practice: applying social policy,* Bristol: Policy Press

Sutton Trust (2000) *Entry to leading universities*, London: Sutton Trust

Sutton Trust (2004) *The missing 3,000: state school students under-represented at leading universities,* London: Sutton Trust

Sutton Trust (2008) *Wasted talent? Attrition rates for high-achieving pupils between school and university,* London: Sutton Trust

Thomas, L (2001) ‘Power, assumptions and prescriptions: A critique of widening participation policy-making’, *Higher Education Policy* 14: 361–76

Thomas, L (2011) ‘Do pre-entry interventions such as ‘Aimhigher’ impact on student retention and success? A review of the literature’, *Higher Education Quarterly* 65: 230-250

Universities and College Admissions Service [UCAS] (2011) Data provided on request by personal communication

Universities UK (2005) *From the margins to the mainstream: embedding widening participation in higher education,* London: Universities UK

Waller, R, Harrison, N, Hatt, S and Chudry, F (2010) *Not being able to see the “ones” for the “threes”!* Paper delivered at Society for Research in Higher Education Annual Conference, Newport, 16th December 2010

Willetts, D (2008) Speech in House of Commons debate on the Education and Skills Bill. *Hansard*: HC Deb, 14 January 2008, c753